Lad Strayer ■ Associated Press Photos

Neighborly support: Martha Ramirez, originally from Arandas Jalisco, Mexico, speaks with Charlie Ojeda at his Dos Hermanos market in Adrian. Ojeda is a founding member of Hispanics of Lenawee Alliance, which is helping Ramirez's family open a Mexican restaurant in Adrian.

Alliance helps strengthen Hispanic businesses

By **ANDY ROGERS**
ASSOCIATED PRESS

ADRIAN – Part humanitarian organization and part chamber of commerce, a local Hispanic organization is working to create unity and promote Latin culture throughout Lenawee County.

Called HOLA (Hispanics of Lenawee Alliance), the association of 30 local business owners and leaders is still defining itself but is committed to a simple mission of using collaborative efforts to inspire, support and uphold the Hispanic community, its members say.

To date, the group has worked on projects ranging from aid for displaced Hurricane Katrina victims to hosting a grand opening celebration for two new Hispanic-owned businesses.

HOLA Chairman Ben Negron, Adrian Meijer store director, describes the organization as a group of local Hispanic business owners, business leaders, clergy and professionals who are interested in fortifying the local Hispanic culture.

The group began with Dos Hermanos market owner Charlie Ojeda and a group of colleagues who hatched a plan to celebrate the annual arrival of Hispanic migrant farm workers.

"We would not have successful businesses without the migrant support," Ojeda said, so a small group went about creating the first local celebration of the workers' arrival in Adrian in 15 years. The event was a resounding success, Ojeda said, and from it grew a greater desire for individual community members to pool their talents and knowledge to advance Lenawee County's Hispanic community.

The group grew quickly from about 12 people to 30 as Ojeda and others recruited new members to the organization, which was unnamed at the time.

"From those 30, we decided we could have a big impact by assisting and helping and making life better for others," Ojeda said.

Negron, whose mother is Mexican and whose father, a local minister, is Puerto Rican, was one of the local Hispanics who jumped at the chance to serve the local Latin community.

"My father being a pastor, I've seen many times when he would have to give of himself to help the Hispanic community, and over the years, I wanted to do something similar," Negron said. "I found this could be a good way for me to practice some of what I learned as a child."

The organization already has proven helpful to Pascual Ramirez.

Ramirez and his family will open a new Mexican restaurant, Los Jimadores, within a few weeks. Setting the business up has been a challenge, Ramirez said, but Ojeda and HOLA have helped the family make their dream a reality.

"He helped me a lot with the liquor license, with finding electrical contractors, with a lot of things," Ramirez said. Once the restaurant opens, his family will move to Adrian from Napoleon, Ohio, and he will serve as its manager.

"This is a good group," he said. "This group is what we need in a community. I'm not a member (of HOLA) yet, but we'll be members once we open up."

Ojeda said the group is still recruiting new partners like Ramirez. Beginning this month, membership eligibility is being expanded to include Hispanic professionals who don't necessarily own or manage a business, he said.

"We're just a growing little baby," Ojeda said. "I'm very excited and I look for us to make our community even better."

Restaurant furnishings: Juan Ramirez displays the handmade furnishings he brought for his new Los Jimadores Mexican restaurant in Adrian, from his hometown of Arandas Jalisco, Mexico.